Cavanagh, Forest Ranger

The Great Conservation Novel

By HAMLIN GARLAND

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XX.

WITH THE AID OF THE PRESS.

LEE VIRGINIA was now living a romance stranger and more startling than any she had ever read. In imagination she was able to look back and down upon the Fork as if she had been carried into another world—a world that was at once primeval, yet peaceful; a world of dreaming trees, singing streams and silent peaks; a realm in which law and order reigned, maintained by one determined young man whose power was derived from the president himself. She felt safe—entirely safe—for just across the roaring mountain torrent the two intrepid guardians of the forest were encamped. One of them, it is true, came of Swedish parentage, and the other was a native of England, but they were both American in the high sense of being loyal to the federal will, and she trusted them more unquestioningly than any other men in all that west save only Redfield. She had no doubt there were others equally loyal, equally to be trusted, but she did not know them.

She rose to a complete understanding of Cavanagh's love for "the high country" and his enthusiasm for the cause, a cause which was able to bring together the student from Yale and the graduates of Bergen and of Oxford and make them comrades in preserving the trees and streams of the mountain states against the encroachments of some of their own citizens, who were openly, shortsightedly and cynically bent upon destruction, spoliation and misuse.

She had listened to the talk of the forester and the supervisor, and she had learned from them that Cavanagh was sure of swift advancement now that he had shown his courage and his skill, and the thought that he might leave the state to take charge of another forest brought her some uneasiness, for she and Lize had planned to go to Sulphur City. She had consented to this because it still left to her the possibility of occasionally seeing or hearing from Cavanagh. But the thought that he might go away altogether took some of the music out of the sound of the stream and made the future vaguely sad.

For the next two days Cavanagh slept but little, for his patient grew steadily worse. As the flame of his fever mounted, Wetherford pleaded for air. The ranger threw open the doors, admitting freely the cool, sweet mountain wind. "He might as well die of a draft as smother," was his thought, and by the use of cold cloths he tried to allay the itching and the pain.

With the coming of the third night Wetherford was unconscious and unrecognizable to any one who had known him in the days of "the free range." He was going as the wild west was going, discredited, ulcerated, poisoned, incapable of rebirth, yet carrying something fine to his grave. He had acted the part of a brave man; that shall be said of him. He had gone to the rescue of the poor Basque instinctively, with the same reckless disregard of consequences to himself which marked his character when as a cow boss on the range he had set aside the most difficult tasks for his own rope or gun. His regard for the ranger into whose care he was now about to commit his wife and daughter persisted in spite of his suffering. To him was his hope, his stay. Once again, in a lucid moment, he reverted to the promise which he had drawn from Cavanagh.

"If I go you must take care—of my girl—take care of Lize too. Promise me that. Do you promise?" he insisted.

"I promise on honor," Ross repeated, and, with a faint pressure of his hand (so slender and weak), Wetherford sank away into the drowse which deepened hour by hour, broken now and then by convulsions, which wrung the stern heart of the ranger till his hands trembled for pity.

The day was well advanced when the sound of rattling pebbles on the hill back of his cabin drew his attention, and a few moments later a man on a weary horse rode up to his door and dropped heavily from the saddle. He was a small, dark individual, with spectacles, plainly of the city.

"Beware! Smallpox!" called Ross as his visitor drew near the door.

The newcomer waived his hand contemptuously. "I've had it. Are you Ross Cavanagh?"

"I am."

"My name is Hartley. I represent the Denver Roundup. I'm interested in this sheep herder killing—merely as a reporter," he added, with a fleeting smile. "Did you know old man Dunn of Deer Creek had committed suicide?"

Cavanagh started and his face set. "No!"

"They found him shot through the neck and dying this morning. As he was gasping his last breath he said 'The ranger knows,' and when they asked, 'What ranger?' he said, 'Cavanagh.' When I heard that I jumped a horse and beat 'em all over here. Is this true? Did he tell you who the murderers are?"

Cavanagh did not answer at once. He was like a man caught on a swaying bridge, and his first instinct was to catch the swing to get his balance. "Wait a minute. What is it all to you?"

Again that peculiar grin lighted the small man's dark, unwholesome face. "It's a fine detective stunt, and, besides, it means $20 per column and mebbe a 'boost.' I can't wait; you can't wait. It's up to us to strike now. If these men knew you have their names they'd hike for Texas or the high seas. Come now! Everybody tells me you're one of these idealistic highbrow rangers who care more for the future of the west than most natural born westerners. What's your plan? If you'll yoke up with me we'll run these devils into the earth and win great fame and you'll be doing the whole country a service."

The ranger studied the small figure before him with penetrating gaze. There was deliberate fearlessness in the stranger's face and eyes, and, notwithstanding his calm, almost languid movement, restless energy could be detected in his voice.

"What is your plan?" the ranger asked.

"Get ourselves deputized by the court and jump these men before they realize that there's anything doing. They count the whole country on their side, but they're mistaken. They've outdone themselves this time, and a tremendous reaction has set in. Everybody knows you've held an even hand over these warring Picts and Scots, and the court will be glad to deputize you to bring them to justice. The old sheriff is paralyzed. Everybody knows that the assassins are prominent cattle ranchers, and yet no one dares move. It's up to you fellows, who represent law and order, to act quick."

Cavanagh followed him with complete comprehension, and a desire to carry out the plan seized upon him.

"I'd do it if I could," he said, "but it happens I am nursing a sick man. I am perhaps already exposed to the same disease. I can't leave here for a week or more. It would not be right for me to expose others."

"Don't worry about that. Take a hot bath, fumigate your cloth, shave your head. I'll fix you up, and I'll get some one to take your place." Catching sight of Swenson and Lize on the bridge, he asked: "Who are those people? Can't they take your nursing job?"

"No," answered Cavanagh bluntly. "It's no use. I can't join you in this at least not now."

"But you'll give me the names which Dunn gave you?"

"No; I can't do that. I shall tell the supervisor, and he can act as he sees fit. For the present I'm locked up here."

The other man looked the disappointment he felt. "I'm sorry you don't feel like opening up. You know

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perfectly well that nothing will ever be done about this thing unless the press insists upon it. It's up to you and me time representing 'the conscience of the east'"—here he winked an eye—"and you federal authority to do what we can to bring these men to their punishment. Better reconsider. I'm speaking now as a citizen as well as a reporter."

There was much truth in what he said, but Cavanagh refused to go further in the matter until he had consulted with Redfield.

"Very well," replied Hartley. "That's settled. By the way, who is your patient?"

Eloquently, concisely, Ross told the story. "Just a poor old mounted bobo, a survival of the cowboy west," he said, "but he had the heart of a hero in him and I'm doing my best to save him."

"Keep him in the dark—that's the latest theory of under a red light. White light brings out the ulcers."

"He hates darkness. That's one reason why I've opened the doors and windows."

"All wrong. According to Finsen he wouldn't pit in the dark. However it doesn't matter on a cowboy. You're a great story yourself. There's a fine situation here, which I'll play up if you don't object."

Cavanagh smiled. "Would my objection have any weight?"

The reporter laughed. "Not much. I've got to carry back some sort of story, and I wish you would persuade Mrs. Wetherford and her daughter to return to the valley. They can do nothing here—absolutely *nothing*. Please say that."

Swenson repeated his commands with all the emphasis he could give them, but neither Lize nor Lee would consent to go. "It would be heathenish to leave him alone in this lonesome hole," protested Lize.

"I shall stay till he is free," added Lee. And with uneasy heart she crossed the bridge and walked on and on toward the cabin till she was close enough to detect the lines of care on her lover's haggard face.

"Stop!" he called sharply. "Keep away! Why don't you obey me? Why don't you go back to the valley?"

"Because I will not leave you alone—I can't! Please let me stay!"

"I beg of you go back."

The roar of the stream made it necessary to speak loudly, and he could not put into his voice the tenderness he felt at the moment, but his face was knotted with pain as he asked, "Don't you see you add to my uneasiness—my pain?"

"We're so anxious about you," she answered. "It seems as though we should be doing something to help you."

He understood and was grateful for the tenderness which brought her so near to him, but he was forced to be stern.

"There is nothing you can do—nothing more than you are doing. It helps me to know that you are here, but you must not cross the bridge. Please go back!" There was pleading as well as command in his voice, and with a realization of the passion his voice conveyed she retraced her steps, her heart beating quickly with the joy which his words conveyed.

At sunset Redfield returned, bringing with him medicine, but no nurse. "Nobody will come up here," he said. "I reckon Ross is doomed to fight it out alone. The solitude, the long trail, scares the bravest of them away. I tried and tried—no use. Eleanor would have come, of course—demanded to come—but I would not permit that. She commissioned me to bring you both down to the ranch."

Lee Virginia thanked him, but reiterated her wish to stay until all possible danger to Cavanagh was over.

Redfield crossed the bridge and laid the medicines down outside the door. "The nurse from Sulphur refused to come when she found that her patient was in a mountain cabin. I'm sorry, old man. I did the best I could."

"Never mind," replied Cavanagh. "I'm still free from any touch of fever. I'm tired, of course, but good for another night of it. My main anxiety concerns Lee. Get her to go home with you if you can."

"I'll do the best I can," responded Redfield, "but meanwhile you must not think of getting out of the forest service. I have some cheering news for you. The president has put a good man into the chief's place."

Cavanagh's face lighted up. "That'll help some," he exclaimed. "But who's the man?"

Redfield named him. "He was a student under the chief, and the chief says he's all right, which satisfies me. Furthermore, he's a real forester and not a political jobber or a corporation attorney."

"That's good," repeated Cavanagh, "and yet," he said sadly, "it leaves the chief out just the same."

"No; the chief is not out. He's where he can fight for the idea to better advantage than when he was a subordinate under another man. Anyhow, he asks us all to line up for the work and not to mind him. The work, he says, is bigger than any man. Here's that resignation of yours," he said, taking Cavanagh's letter from his pocket. "I didn't put it on file. What shall I do with it?"

"Throw it to me," said Cavanagh curtly.

Redfield tossed it over the hitching pole, and Ross took it up, looked at it for a moment in silence, then tore it into bits and threw it on the ground.

"What are your orders, Mr. Supervisor?" he asked, with a faint, quizzical smile around his eyes.

"There's nothing you can do but take care of this man. But as soon as you are able to ride again I've got some special work for you. I want you to join with young Bingham, the ranger on Rock creek, and line up the Triangle cattle. Murphy is reported to have thrown on the forest nearly a thousand head more than his permit calls for. I want you to see about that. Then complete your maps so that I can turn them in on the 1st of November, and about the middle of December you are to take charge of this forest in my stead. Eleanor has decided to take the children abroad for a couple of years, and as I am to be over there part of the time I don't feel justified in holding down the supervisor's position. I shall resign in your favor. Wait now!" he called warningly. "The district forester and I framed all this up as we rode down the hill yesterday, and it goes. Oh, yes, there's one thing more. Old man Dunn"—

"I know."

"How did you learn it?"

"A reporter came boiling over the ridge about noon today wanting me to give him the names which Dunn had given me. I was strongly tempted to do as he asked me to—you know these newspaper men are sometimes the best kind of detectives for running down criminals—but on second thought I concluded to wait until I had discussed the matter with you. I haven't much faith in the county authorities."

"Ordinarily I would have my doubts myself," replied Redfield, "but the whole country is roused, and we're going to round up these men this time sure. The best men and the big papers all over the west are demanding an exercise of the law, and the reward we have offered"—He paused suddenly. "By the way, that reward will come to you if you can bring about the arrest of the criminals."

"The reward should go to Dunn's family," replied the ranger soberly. "Poor chap, he's sacrificed himself for the good of the state."

"That's true. His family is left in bad shape"—

Cavanagh broke off the conversation suddenly. "I must go back to"—He had almost said "back to Wetherford. "My patient needs me," he exclaimed.

"How does he seem?"

"He's surely dying. In my judgment he can't last the night, but so long as he's conscious it's up to me to be on the spot."

Redfield walked slowly back across the river, thinking on the patient courage of the ranger.

"It isn't the obvious kind of thing, but it's courage all the same," he said to himself.

Meanwhile Lize and Virginia, left alone beside the fire, had drawn closer together.

The girl's face, so sweet and so pensive, wrought strongly upon the older woman's sympathy. Something of her own girlhood came back to her. Being freed from the town and all its associations, she became more considerate, more thoughtful. She wished to speak, and yet she found it very hard to begin. At last she said, with a touch of mockery in her tone, "You like Ross Cavanagh almost as well as I do myself, don't you?"

The girl flushed a little, but her eyes remained steady. "I would not be here if I did not," she replied.

"Neither would I. Well, now, I have got something to tell you—something I ought to have told you long ago, something that Ross ought to know. I intended to tell you that first day you came back, but I couldn't somehow get to it, and I kept putting it off till—well, then I got fond of you, and every day made it harder." Here she made her supreme effort. "Child, I'm an old bluff. I'm not your mother at all."

Lee stared at her in amazement. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean your real mother died when you was a tiny little babe. You see, I was your father's second wife—in fact, you weren't a year old when we married. Ed made me promise never to let you know. We were to bring

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you up just the same as if you was a child to both of us. Nobody knows but Reddy. I told him the day we started up here."

The girl's mind ran swiftly over the past as she listened. The truth of the revelation reached her instantly, explaining a hundred strange things which had puzzled her all her life. The absence of deep affection between herself and Lize was explained. Their difference in habit, temperament, thought—all became plain. "But my mother," she said at last—"who *was* my mother?"

"I never saw her. You see, Ed came into the country, bringing you, a little, motherless babe. He always said your mother was a fine woman, but I never so much as saw a picture of her. She was an educated woman, he said—a southern woman—and her name was Virginia, but that's about all I can tell you of her. Now I am going to let Ross know all of this as soon as I can. It will make a whole lot of difference in what he thinks of you."

She uttered all this much as a man would have done, with steady voice and with bright eyes, but Lee Virginia could feel beneath her harsh inflections the deep emotion which vibrated there, and her heart went out toward the lonely woman in a new rush of tenderness. Now that she was released from the necessity of excusing her mother's faults—faults she could now ignore—now that she could look upon her as a loyal friend, she was moved to pity and to love, and, rising, she went to her and put her arms about her neck and said: "This won't make any difference. I am going to stay with you and help you just the same."

The tears came to the old woman's eyes, and her voice broke as she replied: "I knew you would say that, Lee Virginia, but all the same I don't intend to have you do any such thing. You've got to cut loose from me altogether, because some fine chap is going to come along one of these days, and he won't want me even as a stepmother-in-law. No; I have decided that you and me had better live apart. I'll get you a place to live up in Sulphur, where I can visit you now and again, but I guess I am elected to stay right here in the Fork. They don't like me, and I don't like them, but I have kind of got used to their ways of looking at me sidewise. They don't scare as much as it would up there in the city."

Lee turned back wistfully toward the story of her mother. "Where did my mother meet my father? Do you know that?"

"No, I don't. It was a runaway match, Ed said. I never did know who her folks were, only I know they thought she was marrying the wrong man."

The girl sighed as her mind took in the significance of her mother's coming to this wild country, leaving all that she knew and loved behind. "Poor little mother! It must have been very hard for her."

"I am afraid she did have a hard time, for Ed admitted to me that he hadn't so much as a saddle when he landed in the state. He hadn't much when I met him first, but everybody liked him. He was one of the handsomest men that ever jumped a saddle. But he was close mouthed. You never could get anything out of him that he didn't want to tell, and I was never able to discover what he had been doing in the southern part of the state."

As she pondered on her changed relationship to Lize, Lee's heart lightened. It would make a difference to Ross. It would make a difference to the Redfields. Traitorous as it seemed, it was a great relief, a joy, to know that her own mother—her real mother—had been "nice." "She must have been nice or Lize would not have said so," she reasoned, recalling that her stepmother had admitted her feeling of jealousy.

At last Lize rose. "Well, now, dearie, I reckon we had better turn in. It is getting chilly and late."

As they were about to part at the door of the tent Virginia took Lize's face between her hands. "Good night, mother," she said and kissed her to show her that what she had said would not make any difference.

But Lize was not deceived. This unwonted caress made perfectly plain to her the relief which filled the girl's heart.

Lee Virginia was awakened some hours later by a roaring, crackling sound and by the flare of a yellow light upon her tent. Peering out, she saw flames shooting up through the roof of the ranger's cabin, while beside it, wrapped in a blanket, calmly contemplating it, stood Cavanagh with folded arms. A little nearer to the bridge Redfield was sitting upon an upturned box.

With a cry of alarm she aroused her mother, and Lize, heavy eyed, laggard with sleep, rose slowly and peered out at the scene with eyes of dull amazement. "Why don't they try to put it out?" she demanded as she took in the import of the passive figures.

Dressing with tremulous haste, Lee stepped from the tent just in time to see Swenson come from behind the burning building and join the others in silent contemplation of the scene. There was something uncanny in the calm inaction of the three strong men.

Slowly, wonderingly, the girl drew near and called to Cavanagh, who turned quickly, crying out: "Don't come too close and don't be frightened. I set the place on fire myself. The poor old herder died last night and is decently buried in the earth, and now we are burning the cabin and every thread it contains to prevent the spread of the plague. Hugh and Swenson have divided their garments with me, and this blanket which I wear is my only coat. All that I have is in that cabin now going up in smoke—my guns, pictures, everything."

"How could you do it?" she cried out, understanding what his sacrifice had been.

"I couldn't," he replied. "The supervisor did it. They had to go. The cabin was saturated with poison. It had become to me a plague spot, and there was no other way to stamp it out. I should never have felt safe if I had carried out even so much as a letter."

Dumb and shivering with the chill of the morning, Lee Virginia drew nearer, ever nearer. "I am so sorry," she said and yearned toward him, eager to comfort him, but he warningly motioned her away.

"Please don't come any nearer, for I dare not touch you."

"But you are not ill?" she cried out, with a note of apprehension in her voice.

He smiled in response to her question. "No; I feel nothing but weariness and a little depression. I can't help feeling somehow as if I were burning up a part of myself in that fire—the saddle I have ridden for years, my guns, ropes, spurs. Everything relating to the forest is gone, and with it my youth. I have been something of a careless freebooter myself, I fear, but that is all over with now." He looked her in the face with a sad and resolute glance. "The forest service made a man of me, taught me to regard the future. I never accepted responsibility till I became a ranger, and in thinking it all over I have decided to stay with it, as the boys say, 'till the spring rains.'"

"I am very glad of that," she said.

"Yes; Dalton thinks I can qualify for the position of supervisor, and Redfield may offer me the supervision of this forest. If he does I will accept it—if you will go with me and share the small home which the supervisor's pay provides. Will you go?"

In the light of his burning cabin and in the shadow of the great peaks Lee Virginia could not fail of a certain largeness and dignity of mood. She neither blushed nor stammered as she responded, "I will go anywhere in the world with you."

He could not touch so much as the hem of her garment, but his eyes embraced her as he said, "God bless you for the faith you seem to have in me!"

Redfield's voice interrupted with hearty clamor. "And now, Miss Virginia, you go back and rustle some breakfast for us all. Swenson, bring the horses in and harness my team. I'm going to take these women down the canyon. And, Ross, you'd better saddle up as soon as you feel rested and ride across the divide and go into camp in that little old cabin by the dam above my house. You'll have to be sequestered for a few days, I reckon, till we see how you're coming out. I'll telephone over to the Fork and have the place made ready for you, and I'll have the doctor go up there to meet you and put you straight. If you're going to be sick we'll want you where we can look after you. Isn't that so, Lee Virginia?"

"Indeed it is," replied the girl earnestly.

"But I'm not going to be sick," retorted Cavanagh. "I refuse to be sick."

"Quite right," replied Redfield, "but all the same we want you where we

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can get at you and where medical aid of the right sort is accessible. I'm going to fetch my bed over here and put you into it. You need rest."

Lee still lingered after Redfield left them. "Please do as Mr. Redfield tells you," she pleaded, "for I shall be very anxious till you get safely down the mountains. If that poor old man has any relatives they ought to be told how kind you have been. You could not have been kinder to one of your own people."

These words from her had a poignancy of meaning which made his reply difficult. His tone was designedly light as he retorted: "I would be a fraud if I stood here listening to your praise without saying, without confessing, how deadly weary I got of the whole business. It was simply that there was nothing else to do. I had to go on."

Her mind still dwelt on the tragic event. "I wish he could have had some kind of service. It seems sort of barbarous to bury him without any one to say a prayer over him. But I suppose that was impossible. Surely some one ought to mark his grave, for some of his people may come and want to know where he lies."

He led her thoughts to pleasanter paths. "I am glad you are going with the supervisor. You are going, are you not?"

"Yes, for a few days, till I'm sure you're safe."

"I shall be tempted to pretend being sick just to keep you near me," he was saying when Redfield returned, bringing his sleeping couch. Unrolling this under a tree beside the creek, the supervisor said, "Now, get into that."

Cavanagh resigned Lee with a smile. "Good night," he said. "Oh, but it's good to remember that I shall see you tomorrow!"

With a happy glance and a low "Goodby" she turned away.

Laying aside his blanket and his shoes, Cavanagh crept into the snug little camp bed. "Ah," he breathed with a delicious sense of relief, "I see as if I could sleep a week!" And in an instant his eyes closed in slumber so profound that it was barren even of dreams.

CHAPTER XXII.

OUT OF QUARANTINE INTO HEAVEN.

WHEN Cavanagh awoke it was noon, and Swenson, the cook, was standing over him. "I'm sorry, but it's time to be moving," he said, "It's a long ride over there."

"What time is it?" inquired Cavanagh, with some bewilderment.

"Nearly noon. I've got some coffee ready. Want some?"

"Do I? Just watch me!" And he scrambled out of his bed with vigor and stretched himself like a cat, exclaiming, "Whew, but it does feel good to know that I am out of jail!"

Going down to the stream, he splashed his face and head in the clear cold water, and the brisk rubdown which followed seemed to clear his thoughts as well as sharpen his appetite.

"You seem all right so far," hazarded the guard.

"I am all right and I'll be all right tomorrow, if that's what you mean," replied Cavanagh. "Well, now, pack up, and we'll pull out."

For a few moments after he mounted his horse Cavanagh looked about the place as if for the last time, even up at the hill, now dotted by the graves, and last of all at the stream. "I hope you'll enjoy this station as much as I have, Swenson. It's one of the prettiest on the whole forest."

Together they clambered up the side of the hill to the north, and then, with Cavanagh in the lead, followed by his pack horse, they set up the long lateral moraine which led by a wide curve through the wooded park toward the pass. The weather was clear and cold. The wind bit, and Cavanagh, scantily clothed as he was, drew his robe close about his neck, saying, "I know now how it feels to be a blanket Indian. I must say I prefer an overcoat."

A little later the keen eyes of the guard, sweeping the mountain side, were suddenly arrested. "There's a bunch of cowboys coming over the pass," he called.

"I see them," responded Cavanagh. "Get out your glasses and tell me who they are."

Swenson unslung his field glasses and studied the party attentively. "Looks like Van Perne's sorrel in the lead, and that bald face dun just behind looks like the one Gregg rides. The other two I don't seem to know."

"Perhaps it's the sheriff after me for harboring Edwards," suggested Cavanagh.

But Swenson remained silent. He did not see the humor of the remark. "What are they doing on the forest, I'd like to know?" he asked.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)